CRUCIFIXION AND POWER
JOHN 19:1-11
I CORINTHIANS 1:18-25

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On a warm August morning in 1945 the ~~nation~~ world was stunned by the news that a lone bomber had totally and utterly devastated a Japanese city by dropping and detonating what was called an "atomic device". Since that day the name of the game has been power. In a sense it always had been. ("To the victor goes the spoils") had motivated a long line of invading armies from Alexander the Great to the Vikings, to the divisons of Kaiser Wilhelm. The quest for power ~~had~~ has always been the driving force behind the great and grand movements of history.

But ever since that August day in 1945, power has had a new and onimous reality. The Atomic Energy Commission set it out in very plain words: ("...man now has, within the range of his grasp, the means to exterminate completely the human race...to reduce the world to the primitive conditions of the time of Cain and Abel...to scatter to the four winds in a matter of seconds the civilization it has taken so many centuries to put together.") Suddenly, the name of the game became power: no longer how to achieve it, but having achieved it - how to exist with it. Suddenly the problem became how to live without being controlled by the power we had developed in order to control others.

On that score we have not done very well, nor - it would seem, have we been willing ~~to~~ learn how to do better. We have grown accustomed to the Damocles sword of nuclear annihilation: we know that we are the most powerful nation in the world, and yet - in a very real way - we have beome the victims of what we have created.

Power is subtle, complex and above all else, essentially neutral. Power has been defined very simply as the ability to accomplish one's purposes. And within that definition our captivity to our own power becomes clear. We have enough nuclear power to kill every living thing on the face of the earth several times over. We have so much power that it is unthinkable ~~to~~ even to contemplate using it. We have ~~military~~ power in the form of the mightiest military machine the world has ever seen. And yet all that military power could not subdue a nation of 17 million in the jungles of S. E. Asia, unless it was turned loose, destroying entire villages - for instance - to save them from the enemy.

We have amassed industrial power and yet we cannot seem to stop inflation. We have put together smoothly functioning political machinery, designed to enable society to

accomplish its goals. And yet we cannot seem to establish an equitable tax base by which to educate our children. We have plenty of power, and it keeps turning up in the shabbiness and inexusable ammorality of the ITT case and the Watergate conspiracy.

But power, as we have been thinking about it, remains essentially neutral. The same nuclear power that can destroy us, may one day save us from our self-made energy crisis. If you have not yet visited Home Hospital's new addition, you ought to. That's power: economic, scientific, industrial and moral power channeled into healing and compassion. Power is not at all negative in and of itself.

Power, on the first level, is the ability to accomplish one's purposes by external force. It is to push people and materials around, for better or for worse. It is to build a bomb or a hospital: it is Adolph Hitler, when asked about the Vatican's reaction to his anti-semitism, responding - "How many divisions does the Pope have?"

Obviously, there is a second and deeper level at which power must be discussed. Dostoevski suggested that test of civilization is this: a nation could be called civilized when it began to put more emphasis on the forces that persuade than the forces that compel.

On the fifth anniversary of his death last week, a documentary on the life of Martin Luther King was shown again on television. And among the many memorable scenes in that movie, one eloquently expressed power at this second, and deeper level. Lines of black people stood quietly, with immense dignity, on the steps of the court house in Selma Alabama, waiting to register to vote. And through the doors came power, in the person of the Sheriff Jim Clark, prodding with his billy club, pushing, arresting, humiliating. But the power of those courageous Black Americans would win that struggle and many more - even though it could offer no coercion in answer to the Sheriff.

Napoleon Bonaparte, a man who knew a little bit about power, once observed that "God was on the side of the strongest battalions." But later in exile, and wiser we can assume, he wrote: "Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and myself have founded empires. Upon force we founded them and they are gone. Jesus Christ alone has founded His empire upon love, and at this hour millions of men would die for Him whom they never have seen."

And at this point, we move from power as the ability to accomplish one's goals by coercion, to power as persuasion. In this context Christian Faith maintains that the

symbol of power is the Cross of Jesus Christ: not an eagle, not a brandished sword, not a battle flag, but two rough pieces of lumber on which a man died, the victim of the power of coercion.

Now , it's one thing to say that, but it's another thing to understand it as truth and to believe it as Gospel. Even as it was happening it was a most troublesome idea. Pontius Pilate, in fact, couldn't believe what he was seeing and hearing. He had power: he was the governor. The Jewish High Court could pontificate all it wanted about the capital offense of blasphemy - but he, and he alone, had the power of life and death over the prisoner. "Don't you understand, Jesus?" he asked. "I have the power here. I can set you free - or I can have you put to death." And all Jesus would say was, "You have no power over me unless it is given you from above." That is to say: "What you think is power - is not power at all."

Pilate couldn't understand that, and we ought to be able to forgive him for it. Because we don't understand it very well either. The disciples themselves resisted coming to grips with the fact that in Jerusalem two kinds of power were in mortal conflict. On the one hand, the power of the religious establishment and the Legions of Rome: on the other hand, the power of Jesus Christ walking steadily into the jaws of death. They would have preferred the former

Later, after the fact, the issue remained. To the world the Cross of Jesus Christ kept looking like weakness, not power: like a humiliating defeat, not a victory. The thought of God revealing power through suffering was a stumbling block to the Jews - the Jews who longed for the power of King David. The thought of crucifixion as a synonym for power was foolishness to the Gentiles - the Gentiles who knew that the real symbol of power was the Roman eagle. "But", wrote Paul, "Christ crucified is the power of God."

Who wants a God who gets himself pushed around like that? Who wants a God whose only son is despised and rejected and executed? Who wants power if the spoils turn out to be a cross? That's still very much the issue ~~as the church tries to make some sense out of the Lenten Season.~~ If only God had sent a legion of angels and prevented it from happening. If only God would act like a benevolent dictator, and exercise power in ways we can see and feel and understand. But in six hours or so His son was as dead as anybody's son would be under the circumstances. Who wants a God like that?

People - you and I - lose faith precisely because God does not and will not use coercive power. Not only to prevent a crucifixion, but to prevent all the unfair and tragic things that continue to happen to us. ("Why me, God? Why did you let this happen to me? Why didyou take him from me?" You've been there and so have I. Theologically, it is the oldest dilemma in man's recorded history. How do you square the existence of a good and powerful God with the reality of evil? How can you believe in any kind of God in the face of Auschwitz and Cancer and little children dying of starvation? Personally, it is the juggernaut that all of us must face sooner or later. How to believe in God when the bottom falls out of life? How to believe when death seems to be the only power? The cross still ~~stumbles~~ trips us: its power still seems unreal, a dream, a wish -

God does not coerce. The power of God is not to compel, not to force, not to intercede even on behalf of his own Son. God's power is the power of love. It is, and always will be, the power to persuade, the power of the heart - and to look for it elsewhere is to go through life never having found it.

Now, we know a little bit about the power of the heart - the power of love to persuade. Think of it in terms of a school teacher you once had - as we all have. A strict disciplinarian - who coerced you to do certain things: to memorize dates, to draw perfect circles; that is, to conform and to be taught - or else. Or the opposite: the teacher who allowed you to do whatever you wished, whose laxity revealed unconcern. Those teachers did not cause me to grow and learn. That happened when a teacher cared: when something deep in the teacher touched something deep in me and I was persuaded to learn and grow and develop.

Or think of it in terms of your own parenthood. Parenthood can mean coercive power: that is, the ability to insist on certain behavioral standards. By force we can accomplish conformity to our will. And yet we know that unless we convert the heart wehave failed. In important matters - such as a value system - nothing is more bankrupt and doomed to ultimate failure, than coercieve power. ("Don't do it, or else" only delays the "doing" until the "or else" is out of sight. ("Don't do it because I love you" has the creative possibility of being heard and understood and adopted.

God's power is his love. And that love treasures our freedom: that love choses to become powerless and to appeal to the heart. God choses not to make us love him: God

choses not to force us into conformity: God choses not to coerce us into becoming what he wants us to be. Love is never coercion: rather love creates a situation in which we chose, in our freedom, to be what love wants us to be.

Love - God's love - will never violate ~~our freedom~~ that. Rather we remain free - free to resist, deny and even crucify it again and again.

The cross of Jesus Christ becomes, for faith, the symbol of power as we see it as the symbol of love. That's what was intended on calvary - that all men should see how greatly they are loved. And at the level of our deepest need there is nothing more urgent than that. We need love as we need food and drink. We need to be wanted and needed: we need to know that we matter - that someone cares about us - that we are important to someone.

People need that badly enough to call the Crisis Center - an agency in Lnc. w/ 24hr telephone service - more than a thousand a month- many of them just to be reminded that it does matter whether they live or die. People need that badly enough to pay a professional counselor of psychiatrist hundreds of dollars just to take them seriously for an hour at a time. People need people. People need the very real power of human love to heal, to support, to inspire, to motivate. People need to be saved from the literal hell of meaninglessness and despair - by the love of someone else.

The power of the cross, the saving power of the cross of Jesus Christ is just this: it says we are loved. It reveals the very heart of God as the heart of a loving father. It makes very clear the nature of our God to stand with us even when everyone else has fled. It gives us the picture of a God whose power is precisely in his refusal to violate our freedom; a God who wept as his own son died, and whose love can bind up our wounds as we grieve. The power of the cross is a love that does not let us go, but that walks with us even in our own death. It is the power of God's very presence with us.

Ernest Hemingway concluded "For Whom the Bells Toll" with a very powerful scene. Robert Jordan has been fatally wounded and the woman he loves, Maria, wants to die with him. Jordan tells her she must go on and live, and the words he uses suggest the essence of the crucifixion and the very real power of the cross.

"Now you will go for both of us," he said. "You must do your duty now...Now you are going well and fast and far and we both go in thee.. Not me, but us both. The me in thee. Now you go for us both. Truly. We both go in thee now. This I have promised thee."

She started to turn around. "Don't look around" Robert Jordan said "Go." And Pablo hit the horse with a hobbling strap and it looked as if Maria tried to slip from the saddle but Pilar and Pablo were riding close against her and Pablo was holding her and the three horses were going up the draw.

"Roberto", Maria turned and shouted. "Let me stay! Let me stay!"

"I am with thee," Robert Jordan shouted. "I am with thee now. We are both there. Go!" Then they were out of sight around the corner of the draw and he was soaking wet with sweat and looking at nothing.

The Power - but not coercion.

It is Power - in a love that became powerless.

It is the Power to create and heal and save.

Power - in a cross.

AMEN

Father, men have always wondered about the cross. And we confess that our reason fails us as we, in turn, think about its meaning. Be with us as we stand under the outstretched arms: in Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

You and I live in a unique time in the long history of mankind. Until this time the best efforts of men have been dedicated to the creation, refinement and preservation of power: the power to control and coerce. And suddenly this power has been seen to be ineffective. My country is the most powerful nation, militarily, the world has ever known. And yet, with all its might, my nation has been frustrated in accomplishing its purposes in S.E. Asia. Our vaunted power has not been worth much in the jungles of Viet Nam and Cambodia.

The Church, too, is losing what for centuries has been regarded as power. The monolith of Rome has cracked - not yet financially or numerical but morally, inspirationally. For where is the power of the Church to influence in Northern Ireland? Where was it in the American South? Where is it in the agonizing awakening of South America?

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